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8-4-1993

Sport, Entertainment and Gender Equity

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Sport, Entertainment and Gender Equity" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 253.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/253>



SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
August 4, 1993

Just over a week ago The Orlando Sentinel ran a series of three articles dealing with the issue of gender equity in intercollegiate athletics. For those not intimately involved with college athletics this is the hot topic currently rattling across campuses nationwide. Football coaches quake at the prospect of reduced scholarships and budgets, and curse the "extremists" from the women's movement who are threatening their opulent empires.

This issue has been in the wind now for twenty-one years since the passage of Title IX of the Education Act of 1972. To oversimplify, Title IX requires educational institutions receiving aid under the Act to offer equal opportunity to women in athletic programs. This has not happened, the courts have intervened, and now even the terminology has changed. "Gender equity" is now being demanded.

In some places this means that dollars spent on athletics, and the number of sports sponsored for men and women, must approach parity with the percentage of male and female students enrolled. In the Big Ten officials have specified that by 1997 all conference members must have reached a 60- 40 ratio between men's and women's participation. Currently the ratio is 70-30.

Facts and figures are everywhere, and almost all of them point to one thing. Twenty-one years after Title IX the colleges and universities of the United States are a long way from equality, equity, fairness, or whatever else you might want to call it. The gap is huge.

One of the problems in this discussion is a philosophical one, and involves a definition of terms. What is sport? What is the purpose of intercollegiate athletics? What is the purpose of sport within the college curriculum?

Clearly intercollegiate athletics has as its primary purpose the advertising of the school by providing an attractive entertainment package which will generate interest in the institution as well as revenues. This has little to do with sport, and nothing to do with the educational purposes of a college. Within this set of parameters the men's sports of football, basketball, and on a smaller scale hockey and baseball have fit these purposes over the years. In recent years some

women's athletic programs in some places have achieved this level of existence with basketball, volleyball, or soccer.

When women's intercollegiate athletics began its post-Title IX growth, the governing body, the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), took the position that it was not interested in emulating the major revenue producing men's programs. It was primarily interested in developing programs in which women could enjoy the benefits of competition as part of the processes of personal development. This proved inadequate. The lure of dollars and television was too strong, and the women began to emulate the male intercollegiate model.

As this happened the confusion between the purposes of sport and the purposes of intercollegiate athletics, which have always haunted men's intercollegiate athletics, came into the debate over women's sport. The fact of the matter is that women came to covet, what men in minor sports have always coveted, namely the cash and glory via the medium of television.

Sport itself is validated by the rigors and joys of competition, the self-esteem generated, the struggle for perfection within the framework of the playing field. Intercollegiate athletics is validated by television ratings, revenues generated, glory accumulated. If no one is watching, it could not possibly be important, although it could be sport.

Kansas women's basketball coach Marian Washington said, "When women have nobody excited about what they're doing, when there's little support to help them reach their goals, that makes what they do very, very difficult." What Coach Washington is talking about here isn't sport at all, it is intercollegiate athletics as big time entertainment. And if you are in the entertainment industry and no one is watching it is very very difficult. If you are doing sport and no one is watching it shouldn't matter at all.

It is time to recognize this duality within the discussion and deal with it. We must first decide what it is we want for men and for women in the university, sport or intercollegiate athletics. Once having made that decision we can begin to sort out how this can be achieved for both men and women. Gender equity in sport would be fairly easy to achieve, while gender equity in intercollegiate athletics would be most difficult indeed.

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